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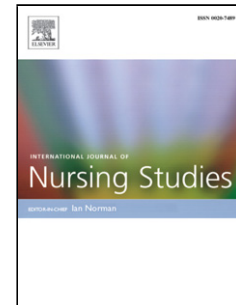
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Editorial**How to peer review and revise manuscripts submitted for publication in academic nursing journals**

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First attempts to establish a peer review for scientific publications date back to the early nineteenth century (Csiszar 2016). Since then peer review systems have undergone several changes and today they are an integral part of most scientific journals around the world. However, such systems are not without critique and continuing efforts are required to keep peer review as objective, as reliable and as helpful as possible (Rennie 2016). From a very practical point of view the peer review process takes place between three parties: the author, the reviewer, and the editor. Ideally, all three work together in a fair, respectful, and constructive way. All three share the same goal: to publish high quality research results in a high quality paper in a high quality journal. Despite these similar objectives all three partners play different roles. This editorial comments on these roles and responsibilities in an attempt to reduce the frustration of partners during the manuscript submission, review, and decision process.

Manuscript preparation (the author)

The guide for authors, available at the homepage of the *International Journal of Nursing Studies* (IJNS) (journalofnursingstudies.com) provides authors with detailed information and on how to prepare and submit manuscripts and other journals will have issued similar guidance. However, at the outset authors may wish to consider whether the paper they plan to write is suitable for their target journal. The aims and scope of the IJNS were described in a previous editorial (Griffiths & Norman 2011) but in addition we recommend that authors view some recently published papers and consider how these papers inform or relate to their current work. Many journals, including the IJNS, ask authors to make outcome statements about ‘what is already known about the topic?’ and ‘what does this paper add?’ These statements offer authors an important opportunity to convince the editors and peer reviewers of the contribution of the paper to knowledge in its subject field.

Finding a ‘model paper’ from your target journal following a research design which is similar to that for your paper can provide authors with practical guidance on the overall structure of the paper, the headings used and how the research design is best described. A sample issue of the IJNS is available at the journal’s homepage (journalofnursingstudies.com). Beware, though, of possible plagiarism – particularly of the research methods section. For example, you may have replicated a previously published research study by another research team and have cited the study in your paper. Their method is exactly the same as yours and it is tempting, particularly if English is not your first

language, to lift a description of the design from the previously published paper and insert it in yours. There's no intent to deceive anyone here – but it is plagiarism and you can't do it.

Another crucial aspect of manuscript preparation is adherence to reporting guidelines. This is important because readers have a right to be informed about your study in a clear, honest, accurate, reproducible and transparent way (Simera & Altman 2013). Without full information readers are not able to judge the validity of your research findings. Decide before manuscript preparation which reporting guideline is appropriate for your research design. The most important and most frequently applicable generic reporting guidelines are listed in the “Guide for Authors” but there may be circumstances, in which these guidelines do not apply. In such cases go to the homepage of the “Enhancing the QUALity and Transparency Of health Research” (EQUATOR) network to select the most appropriate guideline. The EQUATOR network also provides additional information on how to write manuscripts that may be helpful, especially for new authors (Simera & Altman 2013).

The unavailability of a specific reporting guideline does not mean that your manuscript does not follow a structure. If there is no specific guideline for your particular research design, you may wish to select the reporting guideline which is most applicable and apply it to your manuscript thoughtfully; do not ignore items or add page numbers to the checklists if the information requested is lacking. To write “not applicable” is also unhelpful and is at odds with the purpose of reporting guidelines which is to force authors to present all the pieces of information mentioned. If an item is really ‘not applicable’ then explain why this is the case so demonstrating to the editor that you have considered it. Similarly if you as an author cannot report certain pieces of information (e.g. sample size calculation) because it was not carried out then this must be stated clearly.

Guideline items and checklists inform the structure and content of the manuscript and crucially ensure that all necessary information is reported. However, we suggest that you read also the explanation and elaboration documents published along with the guidelines and checklists which make it clear exactly *what* to present under the different headings.

The closer the fit between your topic and to the scope of your target journal, the more familiar authors are with the style and content of manuscripts published in the journal, and the closer authors follow the most appropriate reporting guideline, the easier it is for editors and reviewers to read, understand, and to appraise the submitted work. This accelerates the peer

review and decision process and reduces the probability of getting rejected (Griffiths & Norman 2016).

Manuscript peer review (the reviewer)

Since the top journals in all subject fields can publish only a small proportion of the papers they receive the receiving editor must consider each paper received against the aims and scope of the journal and decide whether or not it would be priority to publish irrespective of a positive peer review. These decisions are not absolute judgements but at the IJNS we would rather screen out a worthwhile paper early rather than put it through a lengthy review process and then reject it. So if the paper you have written is sent out for peer review, congratulate yourself. Irrespective of the final outcome your paper is already considered to be one of the minority of potentially publishable papers which your target journal has received (Griffiths & Norman 2016).

Editors invite peer reviewers who are experts in the topic and/or research method of the submitted manuscript. Before accepting an invitation the reviewer should consider whether they have a potential conflict of interest (whilst journals take steps not to reveal authors' names or location a subject expert may sometimes be able to make an informed guess), if they are sufficiently familiar with the topic and if whether they are sufficiently interested in the paper to devote the time and effort required to provide an informed review. By accepting an invitation the reviewer undertakes to deliver the review to meet the deadline. If a reviewer realizes after accepting an invitation that they are unable to complete the review or they need more time to do so, then let the editor know. Usually the editor and the reviewer will find a solution which is convenient for both.

Numerous tutorials and checklists have been published about how to review manuscripts (e.g. Reidenberg 2002, Spigt & Arts 2010, Christenbery 2011) which cover what a review should contain and how a review report should be presented; these issues are also described in "How to conduct a review" which is available from the IJNS' homepage. Here, we highlight particular features of reviews which are, in our experience, most helpful to authors.

Ideally a review report should consist of two parts: In a first part the manuscript should be summarized briefly. Overall strengths and limitations of the paper, its novelty, importance and contribution to its subject field and its relevance to the journal's target readership should be described and evaluated. Reviewers should comment on whether the

selected reporting guideline fits the study design and whether the manuscript adheres to the selected reporting guideline and to the journal's style. Comments such as these help the editor to put the manuscript into context, and gain an overall impression of the paper's potential contribution and the quality of the research reported. Such a summary also helps the editor to understand the perspective and overall opinion of the reviewer. It is way the reviewer "serves the editor" (Reidenberg 2002) and supports editorial decision making.

The second part of the review report should be a list of numbered statements about how to *improve* the manuscript and so make it more useful and easy to understand by *readers*. In this way the reviewer acts as a "friend of the scientist-author" (Reidenberg 2002) helping to improve the submitted work. Comments should be phrased in constructive, and supportive language with appropriate reference to the sections and pages of the manuscript. A 'free-flowing' discursive review should be avoided. Numbering each statement chronologically will assist the author to respond to the reviewer in a series of numbered responses.

Reviewers need to consider whether their suggested changes to the manuscript are possible. Possible improvements may include, for example, changes to the manuscript's structure and headings, updating references, providing additional or deleting redundant information, recalculations and changes to tables or figures, correcting errors, adding interesting and alternative ideas, and omitting conclusions which could be misleading or go beyond the research findings. On the other hand some changes may not be possible to a completed research project. If reviewers have concerns about the overall appropriateness of the research question, the methods and the overall validity of the results, and they believe that the manuscript suffers from too many or from fatal flaws, then they should state this early in the first part of their review report. Reviewers need not provide long lists of detailed comments in the second part of their review report if they believe the limitations are such that it cannot be revised to meet the standards required for publication.

The editors make a decision on publication of a manuscript with advice from peer reviewers. Since the editors may receive contradictory advice from different reviewers it is preferable that reviewers are not explicit about their recommendation on publication in their comments to the authors.

Manuscripts revision (the author)

If authors receive an invitation to revise and to resubmit their manuscript then they should congratulate themselves because this means the editors are interested in seeing their manuscript again in a revised form. Authors should not be concerned about whether the

suggested revisions are major or relative minor - the important point to remember as an author is that you are now in a dialogue with the reviewers and the editor and the chances of your paper finally being published are much improved.

Receiving a long list of suggested revisions can be demoralising. Some authorities suggest reading all the comments and then putting them aside for a few days to avoid an immediate emotional response (Kotis & Chung 2014). Authors will need to decide whether they are willing or not to do the work required to revise the paper. If authors disagree with the reviewers' and editors' comments then they may decide to submit their manuscript elsewhere. But usually the best decision is to persevere with revisions until the paper is finally accepted for publication or rejected.

An author may believe that the reviewer did not 'understand' their work and may be tempted to complain to the editor about the reviewer's comments or their general competence. This is an unhelpful response. The author may have a different methodological or scientific perspectives to the reviewer or they may prefer another theory or framework. Authors need not agree with reviewers' comments so long as they respond to the reviewers' concerns in a polite, objective, and transparent way and providing evidence to support their response as required. Simply stating that the reviewers' comment is not applicable or ignoring it is unacceptable. And remember that if reviewer does not understand or cannot follow the line of discussion of your paper, it is likely that many readers will not be able to do so either.

Authors who choose to revise the manuscript should respond in detail to *every* comment point-by-point following the numbering system used by the reviewer. Explain the changes made and where appropriate cite section and page number. Simply noting "Done" in response to the changes requested by the reviewer and editor without any further explanation or description is unhelpful, and is likely to lead to your paper being rejected. When revising the manuscript itself authors should use different colours to enable reviewers and editors to spot the changes easily. If editors or reviewers have specific questions about, for example, the rationale for the research method, choice of data collection instruments, variables, or analyses undertaken it is important for the author to provide this information to readers by revising the paper itself, rather than simply in the author's response to the reviewers.

Outlook

Despite ongoing debates and inconclusive evidence supporting its efficacy (Jefferson et al. 2007) the peer review system for scientific publications will remain (Csiszar 2016, Rennie

2016). If the system works well it should help researchers to maintain and to improve the quality of scientific writings and communication (Spigt & Arts 2010). There are no universal standards for conducting peer review and identifying optimal reviewer characteristics is also challenging (Black et al. 1998). Thus, peer review involves the application of professional judgement, ideally by a person who has the background experience required to form a reasoned judgement about the quality of the underlying research and/or scholarship and the contribution of the manuscript to knowledge in its subject field.

This editorial seeks to support authors and reviewers of academic nursing journals to make this process as helpful and constructive as possible with the overall aim of improving the quality of scientific contributions and publications. In 2012 the IJNS launched the Reviewer Excellence Award to recognise the valuable contribution that peer reviewers make to developing and disseminating the knowledge base for professional nursing and midwifery. These reviews are made available on the IJNS homepage and we invite authors and reviewers to view them. We thank our authors for their interest in the IJNS as an outlet for their work and are grateful to our excellent reviewers who invest thousands of voluntary hours to support the authors, the editors and improve the quality of nursing scholarship.

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